

#FAITHACTINGTOGETHER TOWARDS IMPROVED COLLABORATION TO END GBV IN SOUTH AFRICA

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, We Will Speak Out South Africa co-created interfaith briefs on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender-based violence (GBV) and teenage pregnancies. The interfaith briefs were to be used to initiate conversations within faith institutions and communities.

We Will Speak Out South Africa was founded in 2013, in response to research that surfaced the voices of GBV survivors, in which they declared that the first place many survivors think to turn to is their faith leader, but unfortunately, this may also be the last place where they obtained the support they needed. It has grown to a coalition of more than 200 individuals, organizations and church groups and over 400 subscribers, including many faith leaders and survivors of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) who work together to eliminate sexual and gender-based violence in the faith sector and wider society, oppose stigma against survivors, and bring healing.

BACKGROUND: WE CAN NO LONGER BE SILENT

Gender-Based Violence in its diverse forms has reached crisis proportions in South Africa, a realization which sparked outrage amongst thousands of women and men, resulting in mass demonstrations across the country in 2018 and 2019. Outrage has been sparked also by the fact that several of the perpetrators of these incidents have been faith leaders. At the same time, the decade 2020 - 2030 has been identified as the Decade of Action towards achieving the SDGs, including SDG 5: Gender Equality.

In November 2018, President Ramaphosa established a Steering Committee which is currently finalizing a National Strategic Plan to end Gender-Based Violence and Femicide. The first draft mentioned the faith sector only once, and only in relation to its negative contributions to the problem. Since then, several faith actors have advocated for a more significant positive role for the religious sector, not only as part of the problem but also as part of the solution.



Several churches and other faith communities across the country have over the past five years at least begun to address the issue and develop programmes to respond to this crisis. This process has revealed that, like HIV, GBV affects families and communities and is also present in our faith communities themselves. Therefore, we can no longer be silent. While these initiatives are valuable, there is a need for increased collaborative and learning opportunities if the sector is to begin to make a significant impact on GBV. A focus on doctrinal differences rather than on points of agreement makes it difficult to speak and act decisively, not only to prevent acts of violence but also to respond to survivor needs compassionately and without judgement.

WWSOSA has since 2017 hosted three conferences that have intentionally broken the silence that has been prevalent in the faith sector through amplifying survivor voices and has begun to mobilise progressive faith actors to collaborate more, share their learnings and gradually become more willing to collaborate with other GBV stakeholders in their communities.

NOVEMBER 2017: SPEAK, WE ARE LISTENING!

The first such event in November 2017 brought over 100 faith leaders into a space addressed only by survivors, to listen to their experiences when they have approached their faith

leaders for help, and to grapple with their own complicity, lack of responsiveness and even stigmatizing of survivors. This resulted in a dialogue tool that allows faith leaders to understand survivors' experiences of how they have responded to GBV in their ministries (*Asikhulume, Sizwane! / Speak, We are Listening!*)¹

APRIL 2019: MOVING FROM RHETORIC TO ACTION

The April 2019 conference, under the theme "Love in Action", took the conversation further by asking representatives of key churches to share how they had begun to address sexual abuse and abuse of power by church leaders, which resulted in two press releases that publicised some of the most important calls made by faith leaders present there, such as the following, articulated in different ways by three senior leaders:



IF WE DON'T ADDRESS THE
GOSPEL OF SUBMISSION, WE
WILL NEVER EFFECTIVELY
ADDRESS ABUSE

THE INTERFAITH BRIEF ON GBV AS CATALYST

THE INTERFAITH BRIEF ON GBV AS CATALYST

FEBRUARY 2020: WHAT UNITES US AS FAITH COMMUNITIES?

In 2020, WWSOSA facilitated a conference titled "Building unity in voice and action to contribute to South Africa's National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence". The goal was to speak with a more unified voice as the faith sector and contribute meaningfully to government processes, particularly in the context of the finalization of the National Strategic Plan to end GBV and Femicide. The joint F2A Interfaith Brief on GBV was presented at this conference, with the challenge being to consider either adopting it or working towards a local South African statement of commitment. The discussions continued by considering practical ways of how the religious sector could contribute effectively to ending GBV and mitigate its continuing impact in South Africa. The following were some of the main steps for faith communities to be much more responsive to GBV.

Acknowledge our guilt: Silence and cautious responses to issues of GBV are no longer an option. We need to start by repenting – we have abdicated our duty to care for all of God's creatures by ignoring survivors of GBV. We can start by acknowledging this.

Language: Change the language that we use when speaking of GBV and stop whitewashing. Gender-based violence is a sin; all forms of violence are a sin. Examine our teachings, revisit our sacred texts. Historically, some churches in South Africa developed a 'liberation theology'. This contributed significantly to

the changes that took place in relation to opposition to apartheid. This, or something similar, should be applied now – a contextual theology that is relevant to today's context.

Listen to survivors: Engage with women's experiences, particularly survivors, let them raise their voices and hear their wisdom.

Speak Out: The religious sector is an expert when it comes to changing people's mindsets through conversion to our religions. We should apply the same evangelism to change people's views on GBV. Preach openly against GBV and using the Scriptures positively to change mindsets from patriarchal views can achieve much. The Church has a lot of resources and can provide spaces to start dialogues on GBV and host meetings, including survivor support groups.

Be Transparent: Churches should have policies to guide them, and the policies should be open and available for people to read and to understand.

Be accountable: We need to hold each other accountable – if the whole FB sector is working together and holding each other accountable, we will become a force.

Collaborate: Do away with the boundaries between FBOs and CSOs to focus on GBV as the issue. We need a compact – a clear, united agreement. The Church has resources – like buildings – that can be opened to organizations/support groups. We need to meet more regularly as those present here in order to learn from each other and strategize together.

THE ACCOMPANIMENT PROCESS: A FAITH SECTOR TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME AND COMMUNITY OF LEARNING



The Conference proposed working towards a new collaborative project to enhance the capacity of faith communities to end the taboos around GBV and work towards transforming themselves into agents of change. Originally conceptualised as a collaborative project by WWSOSA, this programme has become co-owned by 11 key partners, as they have co-conceptualised and are co-creating it with the aim of it being widely owned, applied and supported, so that parallel processes in diverse faith contexts can actively shift faith narratives and practices simultaneously, for maximum impact.

What has emerged is an innovative process through which faith leaders at all levels are accompanied as they address SGBV and its key drivers in their congregations, reject survivor stigma, offer vital survivor services, and engage in joint initiatives with other community stakeholders. This involves a bottom-up approach of thinking of our experiences as activists and leaders in the faith sector, to try to inspire more activists and take steps to transform our faith communities to be able to make a meaningful contribution to ending GBV.

This project intentionally moves away from a training, or train-the-trainer, model to one of building competences for ongoing emergent learning through mentoring and accompanying faith leaders over six months. It involves an iterative process, beginning with helping the faith leader participants to build their personal self-awareness of their gendered socialization, addressing theoretical/theological foundations, while accompanying them as they make congregational changes, reflect on them, improve on them, and assess their transformative impact to build the Gender- and GBV-competence of their congregation. This process is supported by an interactive online Community of Learning, which expands with each new cohort of participants.

The aim is to rapidly extend the influence of transformative discourses that disrupt the dominant patriarchal discourses and provide open safe spaces for ordinary people to question the received interpretations of sacred texts and normalized religious practices that run counter to human and gender rights, but to do so within their own religious frameworks.

Practically, a cohort of faith leaders is accompanied as they address SGBV and its key drivers in their congregations, reject survivor stigma, offer vital survivor services, and engage in joint initiatives with other community stakeholders. The accompaniment process has been started with participants including ordained or volunteer (Lay) leadership in faith communities of diverse faith groups, including Christian Missionary-Initiated and African traditional churches, Muslim, Baha'I and Hindu faith groups.

The approach seeks whole-institutional change rather than simply personal attitude changes or improving personal knowledge. This is essential, as gender injustice is deeply rooted within patriarchal ideological and structural institutional frameworks and can only be disrupted gradually by practical actions that generate incremental change over time.

NEW FORMS OF ORGANISING THE FAITH SECTOR AS A KEY PLAYER TO END GBV

WWSOSA has furthermore been integrally involved in a national process to take the faith sector to new and exciting levels of organising and collaboration, and the six-month programme plays an integral role in this.

In response to alarming increases in GBV under COVID-19, WWSOSA joined with other progressive faith organizations in June 2020 to form a new faith-based national collective entitled *Faith Action to End GBV*. This was, in a way, the logical next step for WWSOSA. The Collective unites progressive faith sector actors in joint initiatives to address underlying faith drivers of GBV and equip faith communities to transform. Various joint initiatives were agreed upon, one of these being the abovementioned six-month programme.

The FBO Collective Faith Action to End GBV already includes 360 participants and 82 organizations, churches and other faith communities. It focuses on five integrated strategies, rooted in a strong Theory of Change. It assumes that shifting the dominant faith narrative to promote gender justice and equality and equipping faith actors to become allies of GBV survivors and agents of transformation in their institutional contexts will create a new 'zero tolerance' to GBV in the faith sector and wider society, rooted in an understanding that GBV is an abuse of human rights.

Through initiatives like the six-month programme, among others, the Collective empowers faith leaders and their institutions to be gender- and GBV-competent, act as a credible advocacy voice (in alliance with survivors themselves) to ensure accountability of GBV services and achievement of justice in GBV cases; and integrally contribute to multi-stakeholder initiatives to achieve the National Strategy as a credible partner in the National response to GBV.

BUILDING FOUNDATIONS FOR A STRONG FAITH IMPACT IN ENDING GBV

WWSOSA has been asked by the Collective to be the holding partner for a project funded by the GBV Solidarity Fund. Although it only offers funding for part of the work and only until December 2021, it nonetheless provides a solid foundation for growing the scope and impact of this exciting collaboration to transform the faith sector and strengthen its influence in ending GBV in South Africa into the future.

REFERENCES

1. www.wwsosa.org.za/sites/default/files/WWSOSA%20Dialogue%20Tool%20March%202018%20for%20distribution.pdf

We will Speak Out South Africa participated in a series of interfaith dialogues on women's rights and gender equality facilitated by the Faith to Action Network and ACT Ubumbano. On that occasion, 12 faith organizations from seven countries in Southern Africa declared, "We can no longer be silent as we are called to uphold human dignity for all creation." Coming from Bahai, Christian, Muslim and Traditionalist faiths, they developed three Interfaith briefs

on sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence and teenage pregnancy. They also identified opportunities in engaging more effectively within their faith communities. The Faith to Action Network and ACT Ubumbano supported their action plans through micro-grants and technical assistance, contributing to many inspiring results like the ones mentioned in this case study.

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